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AUTHOR Friedlander, Jack
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ABSTRACT

A survey of instructors and students in a cross section of classes at a large, urban, multi-campus community college district was conducted in Fall 1980 to determine: (1) instructors' perceptions of their students' ability or inability to perform or difficulty in performing a series of 14 skills; (2) students' ratings of their confidence in these skills; and (3) the degree of correspondence between instructor and student ratings. Major findings, based on responses from 268 out of 371 faculty members and 6,426 out of 10,000 students, indicated that over 50% of the instructors felt their students could adequately express themselves when speaking, summarize course readings, and complete course assignments on time. However, less than 30% felt that the students could learn independently, explain themselves in writing, and work with statistics. Over 60% of the students felt confident in understanding course assignments, learning independently, and solving problems that require arithmetic. While there was less than a 20% discrepancy between student and instructor responses, a much greater percentage of students than instructors reported that the students could learn independently (63% vs. 29%), express themselves in writing (54% vs. 24%), and solve arithmetic problems (62% vs. 42%). The study report describes methodology, presents and compares the responses of both groups, and discusses implications. (JP)

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Student and Faculty Ratings of Academic Abilities
of Community College Students

Jack Friedlander

Center for the Study of Community Colleges

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ABSTRACT

In Fall 1980, the Center for the Study of Community Colleges conducted a study to determine how community college instructors and students rated the students' basic academic skills. Questionnaires were administered to 371 faculty members in a large, urban, multi-campus community college district and to 10,000 of their students. Instructors were asked to indicate whether most of their students were able or unable to perform or had difficulty in performing a series of skills. Students were asked to indicate their degree of confidence in their abilities with respect to the same set of skills. According to the 268 responding instructors, students were strongest in speaking and completing course requirements and weakest in mathematics, writing, and independent inquiry. Over 40% of the responding instructors indicated that most of their students had difficulty in performing or were unable to perform each of the skills considered. Findings from the student survey, based on 6,426 responses, indicate that students felt most confident of their ability to learn on their own and complete course assignments and less confident in matters related to mathematics and sciences. The study report describes methodology, presents and compares the responses of both groups, and discusses implications.

Student and Faculty Ratings of Academic Abilities
of Community College Students

The decline in the academic skills of entering college students is well documented. Scores on the mathematical and verbal ability sections of the Scholastic Aptitude Tests have declined each year since 1968 (Copperman, 1978). This downward trend in the skills of high school juniors and seniors is also documented by the American College Testing Program (1972, 1976, 1980) and the National Assessment of Educational Programs (Education Commission of the States, 1978).

Reports emanating from community colleges confirm this slide in student academic skills. To illustrate, the results of a basic skills testing program at Miami-Dade Community College revealed that 64 percent of the students were deficient in their computational skills, 43 percent deficient in their reading skills, and 43 percent needed remediation in written English expression (McCabe, 1981).

In two nationwide surveys of community college faculty (Cohen and Brawer, 1977; Brawer and Friedlander, 1979), instructors were asked to indicate how their current courses could be made better. The majority of the faculty in both of these surveys noted that their courses could have been improved if the students "were better prepared to handle the course requirements." In addition, over one-fourth of the instructors said their courses could be improved if there were stricter prerequisites for admission to their classes. Such findings suggest that the academic deficiencies of students are serving to detract from the effectiveness of many community college courses.

Purpose of Study

Given the growing concern on the part of educators and the public with the decline in student basic skills, it would be useful to have information on the following questions: How do instructors rate most students in their abilities to perform basic academic skills? How confident are students in their academic skills? What is the degree of correspondence between students' self-ratings of their academic skills and their instructors' ratings of those same skills? These questions can be answered from data obtained in a survey of faculty (N=268) and their students (N=6,426) in a large multi-campus urban community college district.

This National Science Foundation sponsored study conducted by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges involved administering surveys to students and instructors in thirteen percent of all class sections offered at 10:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. on Wednesday of the fifth week of the Fall 1980 term. Completed surveys were obtained from 268 of the instructors (72% response rate) and 6,426 of the students in their classes. The classes used in this study represented a good cross-section of the subject areas taught in the multi-campus district.

Results

Instructor Ratings of Their Students' Skills

Instructors were asked concerning a specified course they were teaching, "How do you rate the abilities of most of the students in your class?" The response categories were as follows: (1) most of my students are able to do this adequately; (2) most of my students have difficulty in doing this; and (3) most of my students are unable to perform this skill adequately. Responses to this question are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 Here

The information reported in Table 1 shows that just over one-half of the instructors noted that most of their students were able to do the following activities adequately: express themselves when speaking (57%), summarize major points in class readings (56%), work on laboratory exercises by following a set of written directions (54%), have the necessary time to complete course assignments (51%), and understand course reading assignments (50%). Less than 30% of the instructors felt that most of their students were able to perform the following competencies adequately: learn on their own, pursue ideas, and find needed information (29%), express themselves in writing (24%), identify biases that might have influenced the findings of a research report (23%), work on problems or assignments that require college algebra, analytic geometry, or calculus (15%), and work on problems or assignments that require statistics (14%).

These findings show that a high percentage of the instructors--over 40%--noted that most of the students in their classes had difficulty or were unable to perform each of the basic skills considered. According to the instructors, the skill areas in which their students were strongest were speaking and completing course reading assignments. The competencies in which students were weakest were in the basic skills areas--mathematics, writing, identifying biases in research reports, and independent inquiry.

Student Self-rating of Skills

In the classes of the instructors who responded to the faculty survey, the students were also asked to rate their abilities on each of the same fourteen competencies. The response categories were as follows: (1) confident, (2) somewhat confident, (3) not confident. The data appearing in Table 2 reveal that the activities in which the highest percentage of students felt

confident were: understanding course reading assignments (66%); learning on their own, pursuing ideas, finding needed information (63%); and solving problems that require arithmetic (62%). Other activities in which over 50% of the students felt confident were: having the necessary time to complete course assignments (58%), working on laboratory exercises by following a set of written directions (58%), expressing themselves in writing (54%), summarizing major points in class readings (50%), and spending a concentrated period of time--two hours or longer--studying for a course (50%). At the other end of the confidence continuum, less than 40% of the students reported that they were confident in their ability: to identify biases that might have influenced the findings of a research report (37%); to understand science and technical developments and their uses in society (39%); to solve problems that require college algebra and geometry (24%); and to solve problems that require statistics--proportions, probabilities (18%). Thus students feel most confident in their ability to learn on their own, to understand and complete course assignments, and they feel least confident in matters pertaining to mathematics and science.

Comparison of Student and Instructor Ratings of Student Skills

In most instances, there was less than a 20% discrepancy between the percentage of students who reported that they were confident in a given skill and the percentage of instructors who felt that most students in their classes were able to use that skill adequately. However, in three areas, a much greater percentage of students than instructors reported that they--the students--were confident and able to perform adequately the following activities: learn on their own (63% vs. 29%), express themselves in writing (54% vs. 24%), and work on problems or assignments that require arithmetic (62% vs. 42%).

Perhaps the most significant finding of the study is the consensus among students and their instructors that a high percentage of students--in most instances over 50%--have some difficulty in performing activities that require reading, writing, speaking, solving problems requiring arithmetic or algebra, understanding science, identifying biases in research reports, and engaging in independent inquiry.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that a high percentage of students attending community colleges have difficulty with skills involving writing, reading, arithmetic, algebra, science, identifying biases in reports, and independent inquiry. These are the very skills that are needed to achieve the goals of education. If the students in this study were all just starting their postsecondary education, then we can conclude that the colleges have much work to do in assisting them in developing their basic educational skills. However, the majority of the students in this study have completed more than five college credit courses and have received grades of C or better in those courses. Thus it appears that many students are being permitted to enter college courses and are then certified as having successfully completed those courses without ever having to acquire the ability to perform adequately such basic educational skills as reading, writing, arithmetic, speaking, independent inquiry, and understanding and critically evaluating research findings.

During the last decade there has been a steady increase in the percentage of students attending community colleges who were previously excluded from postsecondary education: those with educational disabilities, students for whom English is a second language, and concomitantly, the educationally underprepared (Richardson and Leslie, 1980). According to all projections,

the percentage of nontraditional students--especially those who are academically underprepared--enrolled in community colleges will continue to increase, and the number of traditional full-time students attending these institutions will decline. Given this rapid increase in the proportion of students attending community colleges who are educationally underprepared, the existing practice found in most colleges of allowing students to enter and complete courses without first having to demonstrate mastery of basic skills may no longer be in the best interests of the colleges' constituents.

In many community colleges faculty are being asked to teach their courses to groups of students whose reading, writing, and computational abilities range from the third to the thirteenth grade. (Cohen and Brawer, 1981). Robert McCabe, President of Miami-Dade Community College, has noted that asking faculty to provide instruction to groups of students with such a wide range of academic competencies places the faculty in a situation where neither they nor the students have much opportunity to succeed. This is a disservice to all concerned, and precludes the establishment of an effective learning environment.

The practice of permitting students to enroll in a course regardless of their academic abilities or likelihood for success in that course not only is undermining the instructor's ability to effectively present the class, but it is also having an adverse affect on the students--especially those with weak academic backgrounds and those who plan to transfer to four-year colleges and universities. Studies have shown that course attrition rates are often as high as 30% to 50% and that much of this attrition is a consequence of student difficulty in keeping up with the course (Friedlander, 1981a; 1981b). As for transfer students, Kissler (1980) found that in many states, not only are

fewer community college students transferring to four-year institutions, but among those who do, more are put on academic probation, and more fail to graduate. (This finding was true of the district from which the data in this paper were obtained.) Such findings are typically attributed to the increase in the number of students entering transfer courses with deficiencies in basic academic skills. This in turn has forced many instructors to lower the level at which their course is presented.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the system of permitting students to enroll in courses they wish to attend, regardless of preparation and without adequate information, advice, or support is not a viable method for creating a learning environment in which both faculty and students have an opportunity to succeed. Alternative models are needed for handling the following demands: provide effective instruction and support to the increasing number of students who lack the basic skills necessary for success in college-level courses, ensure that students enrolled in courses possess the skills necessary to succeed in those courses, and maintain high standards in all courses. Otherwise, the college may well be undermining the quality of education it provides its students--from the educationally underprepared to the academically advanced.

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Table 1
Instructor Ratings of Their Students' Abilities
(N=268)

In Percentages

<u>Student Skill Area</u>	Most Able	Most Have	Most Unable
	To Do Skill	Difficulty	To Perform
	<u>Adequately</u>	<u>In Doing Skill</u>	<u>Skill Adequately</u>
Express self verbally	57	36	7
Summarize major points in reading	56	37	7
Work on lab exercises by following directions	54	36	10
Have time to complete course assignments	51	45	5
Understand course reading assignments	50	45	5
Solve problems that require arithmetic	42	41	18
Integrate various parts of course	38	46	16
Understand science developments	37	49	14
Spend concentrated periods of time studying	33	60	7
Learn on own--independent inquiry	29	60	11
Express self in writing	24	59	17
Identify biases in research reports	23	50	27
Solve problems that require algebra or geometry	15	42	43
Solve problems that require statistics	14	50	37

Table 2
 Student Self-ratings of Skills
 (N=6,426)
 In Percentages

<u>Student Skill Area</u>	<u>Confident</u>	<u>Somewhat Confident</u>	<u>Not Confident</u>
Understand course reading			
assignments	66	30	4
Learn on own--independent inquiry	63	33	4
Solve problems that require			
arithmetic	62	28	10
Have time to complete course			
assignments	58	34	7
Work on lab exercises by			
following directions	58	32	10
Express self in writing	54	36	10
Summarize major points in reading	50	45	5
Integrate various parts of course	50	42	9
Spend concentrated period of			
time studying	50	39	11
Express self verbally	48	38	14
Understand science developments	39	46	15
Identifying biases in research			
reports	37	50	13
Solve problems that require			
algebra or geometry	24	29	47
Solve problems that require			
statistics	18	40	43